

# Washington



## Successful Physical Activity Program for Older Adults

### Public Health Problem

About 12 million older adults living at home have chronic conditions and report limited ability to perform daily activities. Physical limitations, which are associated with insufficient physical activity and overweight, decrease quality of life, increase the need for costly long-term care, and make challenging demands on family members and other caregivers.

### Taking Action

The University of Washington's Health Promotion Research Center focuses on healthy aging. In 1993, the center collaborated with the Group Health Cooperative of Puget Sound and Senior Services of Seattle/King County (SSSKC) to develop the Lifetime Fitness Program (LFP), a physical activity program that consists of exercises developed specifically for older adults. These exercises have been packaged into a program that emphasizes four key areas critical to the health and fitness of seniors: stretching and flexibility; low-impact aerobics; strength training; and balance. One-hour classes that meet three times a week are designed to be supportive and socially stimulating. Many senior participants enter the program for the social stimulation as much as for the physical benefits.

In 1998, Group Health Cooperative, a large Seattle-based Health Maintenance Organization, began offering participation in the program as a benefit to all its Medicare enrollees. SSSKC obtained funding from the local Area Agency on Aging to make the program available to community-dwelling seniors via senior centers.

### Implications and Impact

The pilot study showed that LFP participants improved significantly in almost every area tested, from physical and social functioning to levels of pain and depression. The health care costs of participants who attended the program at least once a week were significantly reduced. A recent economic analysis of Medicare enrollees showed that those participating in LFP at least once per week had significantly fewer hospitalizations (by 7.9%) and lower health care costs (by \$1,057) than nonparticipants.

In seven years, LFP progressed from implementation at one site to 64 community sites (49 in Washington alone), and the program currently has 2,550 seniors enrolled in six states. The National Council on Aging recognizes the program as one of the top 10 physical activity programs for U.S. seniors.

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